



## Venezuela

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, on the condition that its practice does not violate public morality, decency, or the public order, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There were some efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 352,144 square miles and a population of 27 million. According to government estimates, 92 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and the remaining 8 percent is Protestant, practiced other religions, or is atheist. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council estimated that evangelical Protestants constitute approximately 10 percent of the population. A variety of missionary groups are present.

There are small but influential Jewish and Muslim communities. The Jewish community numbers approximately 15,000 and is most active in the capital, Caracas. The Muslim community of more than 100,000 is concentrated among persons of Lebanese and Syrian descent living in Nueva Esparta State and the Caracas area.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion on the condition that the practice of a religion does not violate public morality, decency, and the public order; the Government generally respected this right in practice.

The Directorate of Justice and Religion (DJR) in the Ministry of Interior and Justice is mandated to maintain a registry of religious groups, disburse funds to religious organizations, and promote awareness and understanding among religious communities. Each group must register with the DJR to have legal status as a religious organization. Requirements for registration are largely administrative, the key exception being that groups serve the community's social interests. Some groups have complained that the process is slow and inefficient. There were no accounts of the Government refusing to register certain religious groups in the period covered by this report.

A 1964 concordat governs relations between the Government and the Vatican and provides the basis for government subsidies to the Roman Catholic Church. All registered religious groups are eligible for funding to support religious services, but most money goes to Catholic organizations. While the Government continued to fund Catholic-operated schools during the period covered by this report, the Government directly funded the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) at reduced levels. There were reports of continued government funding for certain evangelical groups, although much of this was related to social projects implemented via the Government's social programs, and the specific amounts were unavailable.

Foreign missionaries require special visas. Missionaries expressed concern about refusal rates for first-time religious visas and, less frequently, renewals. Some missionary groups also complained that the religious visa process was prone to

delays. The Government enforced visa requirements. The Government asked a group of Seventh-day Adventist university students and professors from the United States to cease providing medical care to indigenous persons in the State of Bolivar after the Government determined that the group did not have the proper visas and permits. In April 2007 the group departed the country.

U.S. missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) did not return to the country during the period covered by this report. In 2005 the Mormons withdrew 219 missionaries, citing difficulties in receiving religious visas.

The Government continued to provide annual subsidies to Catholic schools and social programs that help the poor, although such government subsidies were reduced in some states. Other religious groups are free to establish their own schools.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Constitution forbids the use of religion to avoid obeying the law or interfere with the rights of others; however, there were efforts by the Government, motivated by political reasons, to limit the influence of the Catholic Church and missionary groups in certain social and political areas. Leaders from a number of religious groups noted that since the reelection of President Chavez on December 6, 2006, the Government has been less open to dialogue.

The Government continued to prohibit foreign missionary groups from working in indigenous areas. In 2005 the Ministry of Interior rescinded permission for the New Tribes Mission (NTM) to conduct its social programs among indigenous tribes; NTM appealed to the Supreme Court, and the case remained pending at the end of the period covered by this report. The NTM withdrew more than 100 NTM missionaries from the indigenous areas in compliance with the Government's order. Other foreign missionary groups working in the indigenous areas departed voluntarily.

On March 19, 2007, a Caracas municipal court sentenced Andres Jose Rodriguez Rojas to 15 years in prison for the April 2006 murder of a Catholic priest who worked for the CEV. The Catholic Church and the Government had initially clashed over the handling of this case.

In January 2007 the Government declared its intention to withdraw the broadcast license of NCTV, a regional Catholic Church-affiliated network. The Government and Church leaders reached an agreement by which NCTV continued operating in the states of Zulia and Carabobo but returned to state control other frequencies that NCTV was no longer using. Public confrontation between Catholic bishops and government officials continued. Vale TV continued to be broadcast as a Catholic-operated station during the period covered by this report.

President Chavez engaged in numerous rhetorical personal attacks on specific Catholic bishops, including during a January 8, 2007, swearing-in ceremony for his new cabinet and his January 10 inauguration address. He specifically warned Catholic bishops to refrain from commenting on political issues. Prior to the December 6, 2006, presidential election, the four senior leaders of the CEV sent President Chavez a letter urging him to respect minorities and to promote harmony, dialogue, and understanding among Venezuelans. During its January 7-13, 2007, meeting with all bishops, the CEV issued communiques urging the Government to respect political pluralism and freedom of expression.

The military chaplain corps consisted almost exclusively of Catholic priests. Although armed forces members of other religious groups were allowed to attend services of their faith, they did not have the same access to clergy members that Catholic service members enjoyed. During 2007 authorities tightly regulated and limited access of evangelical chaplains to prisons. In 2005 the Ministry of Interior and Justice permitted the entry of evangelical chaplains to several of the prisons, positions that formerly had been open only to Catholics.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Anti-Semitism

The President, government officials, and government-affiliated media outlets promoted anti-Semitism through numerous

anti-Semitic comments that created a spillover effect into mainstream society. There was a rise in anti-Semitic vandalism, caricatures, expressions at rallies, intimidation, and physical attacks against Jewish institutions.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported that the President and government officials expressed anti-Semitic sentiments, blaming Israel and the Jews for the world's problems and utilizing stereotypes about Jewish financial influence and control. In criticizing Israel during the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, President Chavez made anti-Semitic statements. On August 25, 2006, in Beijing, and again in Doha 3 days later, President Chavez likened Israeli behavior to that of the Nazis and reiterated the theme of genocide. On August 6, 2006, on the television program, *Aló, Presidente*, on *Venezolana de Televisión*, President Chavez accused Israelis of "applying to the Lebanese people and to the Palestinian people the same treatment they have so criticized about the Holocaust." On July 28, 2006, in an interview broadcast domestically and on Al-Jazeera television, President Chavez stated that Israel's actions regarding the Palestinians and Lebanon were "perpetrated in the fascist manner of Hitler... they are doing what Hitler did to the Jews."

Government-sponsored media outlets utilized anti-Jewish caricatures and political cartoons on several occasions. The local Jewish community expressed strong concerns that such statements and publications fostered a climate permissive to anti-Semitic actions. The hosts of *La Hojilla*, a pro-Chavez talk show on official government television, made recurring anti-Semitic slurs, and the Government's de facto official daily newspaper, *Vea*, regularly published anti-Semitic comments.

Extremely offensive anti-Semitic graffiti and leaflets appeared on synagogue walls and in Jewish neighborhoods and increased in the Caracas area following the July-August 2006 conflict involving Israel and Hezbollah. Between June and September 2006, buildings associated with the Jewish community were vandalized four times, according to an international Jewish group. Jewish leaders also expressed concern over the Government's close relationship with Iran, whose President called repeatedly for the annihilation of the country of Israel.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Embassy maintained close contact with various religious communities. The U.S. Ambassador met regularly with religious authorities and when appropriate sought to raise their concerns with appropriate government officials. Embassy representatives' access to government officials was limited.

Released on September 14, 2007

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2007/90271.htm>